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ABSTRACT

This paper provides background on The National Library of Estonia (NLE), discusses a fellowship project for developing the National Library, and presents the impressions of the author, an Estonian American, who traveled to Estonia. The NLE looks to the West for automation, information, and institutional modeling. The NLE is Estonia's equivalent of the Library of Congress, but with a broader historic role in training librarians; it is the mandatory depository library for all books and magazines published in Estonia. The NLE's mission is to provide, preserve, and make available Estonian literature. There is widespread "technological friendliness" among National Library staff and public and school libraries in Estonia; much that is new and current comes through donations from contacts abroad and in Estonia. The NLE has a full conference center; a cafe; foreign reading rooms; a plan for a childcare facility; exhibit space; handicapped accessibility; and an arts division with musical scores, CD's, and recordings of Estonian composers and conductors. A mainframe computer that connects its operations, management development, and library automation are some of the needs that have been identified by the NLE. The fellowship project called for teaching and training to help develop operations in Estonia's Parliamentary Information Department. There was particular interest in acquisitions policies, techniques of analytical research, library automation systems, access to worldwide databases, and a general review of U.S. librarianship. (AEF)

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ESTONIA - Going Home Again: Returning to the Roots

by Maria Pedak-Kari

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Good Morning! or Tere Hommikut in Estonian.

Right now it's 5 p.m. in Tallinn, Estonia. Thousands of men, women and children of all ages from across this Baltic country and from Estonian communities abroad are singing. They are practicing for the final celebration of the 125th anniversary of the very first Estonian Song Festival. Estonia's has been called the singing revolution. What's truly amazing is that they never stopped singing-thought the words were often dictated or forbidden and they never gave up on their cultural and historic birthright to be free Estonians in a democratic Estonia.

When Henry first proposed this program, I thought, "Great - piece of cake." The closer today got, the more I put off putting my thoughts on paper. Then with a jolt I realized that probing emotions connected to being Estonian, being american and sometimes being overwhelmed or confused by one or both was just a tad uncomfortable. And so, I will do the easy part first - giving you some background on both the country and its National Library. Without this backdrop, it's difficult to understand "Going Home Again."

ESTONIA - BACKGROUND:

The Republic of Estonia, on the Gulf of Finland, west of Russia and, definitely Western in soul, is home to 1.6 million people. Just over one million are ethnic Estonians whose language and culture is Finno-Ugric and who, on August 20, 1991, wrestled back their independence from the crumbling Soviet Union. Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia's political expansionism during World War II stole Estonia's freedoms along with those of Latvia and Lithuania. Fifty years of Soviet genocidal population policies designed to

destroy Estonian language and culture could not overcome this people's stubbornness and ethnic identity. Within the first year of regained independence, Estonians voted in a new constitution, new voting laws and a freely elected Parliament. They also created their own stable currency. As a result, Estonia has the fastest growing economy of any part of the former Soviet Union.

Estonians are, however, learning that democracy can be messy and contradictory, and that the free market causes highs and lows that are painful in everyday life. Both unemployment and the nouveau riche are growing rapidly.

THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF ESTONIA:

The National Library of Estonia or NLE serves as an excellent example, almost a personification, of the Republic of Estonia's past, present and future. Rooted in strong cultural identity and a firm belief in freedom, tossed through countless Soviet political winds, emerging as the last Soviet styled architectural monolith with vying excellent and shoddy workmanship, the National Library today looks firmly to the West for automation, information and institutional modeling. To Estonians, it represents a stable source of historical knowledge and a means to satisfy their curiosity about the world and all of its possibilities.

Founded in Toompea Castle in 1918 as the State Library, the NLE is now situated in a castle of its own - the new, eight story building begun in 1985 and built throughout the reign of five prime ministers and two entirely different systems of government. Think about having to negotiate money from five successive officials to complete one capital

project. The credit for this achievement goes to the vision of Director Ivi Eenmaa and the professionalism of her staff of over 600.

The National Library is Estonia's equivalent of the Library of Congress, but with a much broader historic role in training the nation's librarians. Currently it is shepherding the fledgling, reconstituted Estonian Library Association. It houses four and a half million volumes, of which twenty five percent are in Estonian and the remainder in Russian and other foreign languages. It is the mandatory depository library for all books and magazines published in Estonia.

The mission of the NLE is to provide, preserve and make available Estonian literature. Even during the worst Soviet years, Library staff quietly and at great personal risk thwarted Soviet censors and rewriters of history by hiding books, pamphlets and memorabilia from the 1920's and 30's when Estonia was free. I saw these materials being reintegrated into their rightful places in stacks and reading rooms from which everyone, Russian, American and Estonian alike could borrow them. The oldest book in their rare book collection dates 1486. The oldest Estonian book is Stahl's sermon book printed from 1641-1649.

The commitment to opening this institution (it was still being built AND repaired while I was there) and making it viable was amazing. With inadequate gasoline supplies, undependable vehicles and not extra staff, librarians at the National Library moved 3.5 million books and all the various library divisions from three locations to this new library building.

In spite of no heat, leaks in several ceilings, a lack of decent security, electricity

and corridor lighting and erratic paychecks, NLE staff organized books, magazines and some newspapers in some 12 languages and two different alphabets while learning to use automation and computers which they wheel daily to the few available secure locations. There is widespread technological friendliness among National Library staff as well as among the public and school libraries throughout Estonia. I just received a letter last week that mentioned computer courses for all school librarians - this in spite of no computers. "We have to prepare for the future," she wrote. Much that is new and current has come through donations from carefully cultivated contacts abroad and at home. For example, in the Parliamentary Information Department (PID), there were many valuable American reference works on the shelves thanks to the United States Government, working through the Library of Congress and Congress' Frost Task Force AND Ivi Eenmaa's long time Western networking.

Now completed at the NLE are a full conference center, a cafe, foreign country reading rooms; still planned is a childcare facility. Then National Library may well become the cultural center of Tallinn. It has a tremendous amount of exhibit space, handicapped accessibility, and an exquisite arts division with musical scores, CD's and recordings of Estonian composers and conductors like Neeme Jarvi. Seating is available for 600 people. Since opening its doors, the NLE has been teaming with people and tour groups, including many from abroad. It is the only place in Tallinn that offers handicapped accessibility.

The NLE is painfully aware of its need for a mainframe computer with which to connect and streamline its operations. It also needs strong management development

for its entire upper and middle management. Librarians in every locale, I visited talked about the need for automation.

While I was in Estonia, the challenge to librarians was how to keep Russian language periodicals up-to-date on their shelves. Hyperinflation and a non-existent distribution system in Russia had stopped delivery almost completely. My Estonian colleagues were considering driving to Saint Petersburg themselves to pick up issues. The importance placed on library services to Russian speaking library users was underscored time and again throughout my travels in Estonia, which were many thanks to the Estonian Library Association. I saw storyhours, school visits and book displays in Russian at all the libraries I visited. Bilingualism at its professional best.

THE FELLOWSHIP ITSELF:

Originally the fellowship project called for teaching and training to help develop proper operations in its Parliamentary Information Department. There was particular interest in acquisitions policies and techniques of analytical research. In addition, the project stated interest in basic information about library automation systems, access to worldwide databases and a general review of U.S. librarianship. While eventually I did work with the PID staff, the first quarter of my stay went into an overall orientation to the NLE and the second into helping with overall Publicity Department projects since I have a strong background in public relations, as well as totally unexpected requests, such as translating the United States Legal code as it relates to the Librarian of Congress.

For both practical and, later I learned, political reasons, I was assigned to the

Publicity Department. The physical arrangement was wonderful. I had my own desk (someone else was bounced), access to a computer and printer and keys to the building. I was also given a pass to the Parliament Building - a much coveted item.

While speaking Estonian was a tremendous asset and I thank my parents for persevering in teaching me this language with 14 declensions, I found myself working hard to upgrade my Estonian - to learn library vocabulary since I had never needed it over my 20 year career here and to become au currant. My colleagues were selfless in their help with reviewing and correcting my lectures as well as answering countless questions.

I was very impressed with the strong English language mastery is respected and aimed for throughout Estonia. This came home clearly when 37 people showed up for my first, informal English language conversation class - another of my unexpected requests. For eight weeks, I ran two sessions a week.

Two elements make the National Library. One is the incredible savvy and determination of the Director, who is still wrestling funds, support and opportunity from within and without and the other is the professionalism and dedication of the staff, who regularly work without pay when the payroll cannot be met.

So what did it feel like? Was it too hard? or, coming from America, too easy?

It almost hurt physically to be so alive. For four months of what surely would have been a blase mid-life year otherwise, I lived with an intensity unparalleled in my life. All my emotions were bubbling and perking just below my outer skin. From within and without, life was me, 100%. I was really living and walking and breathing in Estonia! The

gray drabness of buildings was extremely colorless and depressing. The flowers in kiosks were brighter and more fragrant. The dependable public transportation system was wonderful inspite of leaded gasoline and diesel fuel. The old, more old and pained. The young, more natural and incredibly optimistic. The family graves more personal. The beauty of back to back copying more profound. I stared at people and places and myself in it, hoping that I could thus impress it all into my active memory to last forever. I was living in Estonia, the country of my parents, the country I had heard about all my life, the country of several thousand years of ancestors. It was real and I was real and we were even real together with a meaningful role for each other.

The ALA/USIA fellowship enabled me to bring into unity and harmony, components of my life which had existed as separate compartments, next door but not connected. I have had an Estonian life, which is parallel to my American life, of which working as a professional librarian has been a large part. My months in Tallinn allowed a synthesis of these parts. I was able to use my American professional skills in Estonia to help Estonian librarians.

I felt tremendous pride. These were good people working against immense odds. How many of us are dedicated enough to work in unheated building without the certainty of a paycheck? How many of us give seats to old folks or young mothers or pregnant women regardless of their ethnic background or color?

I felt sadness. Fifty years of Soviet control and punishment has destroyed the initiative, the spontaneity, the ability to take risks in so very many people. Librarian after librarian would tell me what they were lacking, what problems they were facing. And

when I responded by asking what they were doing about this, they stared at me and said simply, "We're waiting." "For what," I replied. "They haven't decided. They don't have the resources for us." "They. Who they? It's up to you to tell them what you need and want. Get there first. Make a proposal." Silence.

And, I felt amazement. In spite of and because of everything else I have said, I saw a tenacity, a belief in a free future, no fear of technology and a reaching out to the West, a yearning to reconnect, especially by the young. Yes, there was also naivete.

I found myself cheerleading. Whenever a colleague complained, I pointed out the positives. Estonians don't realize how well they have done in a short while. To me, it was clear. When they asked me if I was always like this, I said well mostly - its the American in me. And it was and is the American can-do, can solve, can make happen spirit that I shared.

And lastly, there is a feeling of responsibility. We have so much here. They are struggling with so little. Together with a friend, I am setting up a book donation program under the auspices of the World Bank. Our aim is to send an up-to-date American encyclopedia as well as other reference books to every school in Estonia - all 600 of them. English language materials that I saw while there were pathetically out of date. We will be turning to American publishers, civic organizations and schools for support and to all of you. We are counting on American generosity and good will. The Fellowship lives on even though I am back in America.

My Book Fellowship work raised awareness for librarians throughout Estonia about numerous approaches used in the United States to manage work and to solve problems.

While I contributed specifically with a newsletter to members of Parliament, the introduction of usage statistics for the Parliamentary Information Department, use of an evaluation form for the audience of every presentation I did (translated from one used in Montgomery County, Maryland public libraries) and teaching English, it is my firm belief that my greatest value during four months in Estonia was modeling American group process techniques and work attitude and in breaking down the terrible sense of helpless isolation that surrounds Estonian librarians after 50 years of Soviet tyranny. Yet, it is clear to me that I received a great deal more than I gave. I gained a profound respect for my own flexibility and resourcefulness, sometimes startled at my own capability. There is deep satisfaction working to your own core. I have come back more whole, a better person, a better librarian and a better Estonian American.

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